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SUBJECT: REACTION OF SLOVAKIA'S ETHNIC HUNGARIANS TO NEW GOVERNMENT

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¶1. (SBU) SUMMARY: New Slovak PM Robert Fico's decision to form a ruling coalition with the Slovak National Party (SNS) following the June 17 parliamentary elections elicited a strong negative reaction from the country's sizeable Hungarian minority. SNS leader Jan Slota is notorious for anti-minority remarks targeted mainly at ethnic Hungarians. Emboffs met with a number of prominent Slovak Hungarians from the political, cultural, and academic spheres to discuss their opinions about the new government. They expressed worries, lamenting that the SNS presence in the government has the potential to threaten minority rights and empower extremist nationalist groups throughout the country. The Hungarian community's main concern is that Hungarian-language education and the ability to use the language in public forums will be curtailed. US Embassy Bratislava will continue to take every opportunity to emphasize the importance of minority rights, tolerance, and ethnic diversity and speak out against hate crimes and any attempt to harm minority rights and cultural life. In the meantime, the Slovak MFA is trying to tamp things down with its Hungarian counterparts. END SUMMARY.

#### BACKGROUND

¶2. (U) According to the latest census (2001), ethnic Hungarians constitute almost 10 percent of Slovakia's population; they are the country's largest minority with a numerical strength of 520,000. The Hungarian Coalition Party (abbreviated SMK in Slovak and MKP in Hungarian) represents their interests on both the local and national levels. SMK was a member of the ruling coalition in 1998-2006 but is now part of the opposition along with its former coalition partners SDKU and KDH. The party ended up with 11.68 percent of the national vote in the June 17 elections, only slightly less than the 11.73 percent that SNS received. SNS was the only party with which SMK categorically refused to enter a coalition agreement, as it considers SNS leader Jan Slota's nationalist agenda unacceptable. SNS was a member of the ruling coalition in the 1994-1998 government of Vladimir Meciar and has once again joined Meciar's HZDS (along with PM Robert Fico's Smer) in the government. SNS now has 20 seats in parliament (the same number as SMK) and controls the ministries of education, construction and regional development, and environment.

¶3. (SBU) Although the current tensions between Slovak nationalists and the country's Hungarian community are connected to SNS's recent return to power, they are rooted in conflicting views of the two nations' shared history. For hundreds of years, the area that now constitutes Slovakia was a part of the Hungarian (later Austro-Hungarian) empire; Slovaks point out that they faced discrimination as minorities in the country. The situation was reversed after World War I, when a large number of Hungarians ended up as minorities in the newly created Czechoslovakia. Arguments over past injustices and the fairness of the current border between the two countries still exist in both communities. Slovakia's ethnic Hungarians demonstrate a strong Hungarian identity and attachment to what they call the "mother country"; such sentiments raise questions about their loyalties to Slovakia. Some Slovaks fear that areas

populated mainly by Hungarians wish to secede from the country and react strongly to suggestions of autonomy for these regions. Hungarians adamantly refute the claim of secessionist goals, arguing that they recognize that Slovakia is their home but wish that Slovaks would respect their cultural and linguistic differences.

#### WHAT THIS MEANS FOR AMERICAN INTERESTS IN SLOVAKIA

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14. (SBU) The protection of minority rights is a vital component of democratic consolidation within multi-ethnic societies. Slovakia still struggles with the question of how to incorporate its minority groups into its political, economic, and cultural life. US Embassy Bratislava places a special emphasis on promoting diversity and tolerance in the country (FY 2008 Mission Performance Plan). The nationalist rhetoric and agenda of SNS pose a potential threat to minorities and undermine efforts to fully integrate them into society. Slovakia's new government has already garnered a negative reaction from the European community due to the inclusion of SNS in the ruling coalition; it is important that the country be forthright and strong in its protection of minority rights. Slota's rhetoric has the potential to cause divisions and instability within the government as the other coalition partners struggle to reign in the SNS leader and minimize the damage done by his remarks. PM Fico has promised to keep Slota under control. We will try to keep him to that promise.

#### HUNGARIANS FEAR SNS INFLUENCE ON GOVERNMENT POLICY

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15. (SBU) Embassy contacts contend that the vast majority of Slovakia's ethnic Hungarians are dissatisfied and disappointed with the ruling coalition, mainly due to the presence of SNS. Although it is difficult to judge the new government from the few weeks that it has been in power, they argue that the signs pointing to its future ambitions are discouraging. The very names of Meciar and especially of Slota carry with them very negative associations, as the general point of view within the Hungarian community is that the latter did all he could to destroy Hungarian-language education and Hungarian

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cultural life during the 1990s. Since the election in June, Slota has made several statements to foreign press that have enraged Hungarians in both Slovakia and Hungary. PM Fico's government states that it supports and values minority rights; Hungarians admit that Dusan Caplovic, the Deputy PM for European Affairs, Human Rights and Minorities seems very reasonable and trustworthy. Nonetheless, they question the extent to which the government's actions will mirror the stated commitment to minority issues.

16. (SBU) The single most important issue for many ethnic Hungarians is the availability of and support for Hungarian-language education (preschool through university). Embassy contacts argue that SNS asked for and received the Ministry of Education because the party opposes the very idea of education in minority languages. Prominent Hungarians from the academic sphere point to the difficulties that Hungarian-language schools faced in the 1990s under the Meciar government, which included an SNS-controlled Ministry of Education. Although the current government program does not propose any concrete changes to minority education, the wording it uses to discuss the topic demonstrates the influence of SNS. The program highlights the need to emphasize national values and patriotism in education and adds that instruction in minority languages cannot come at the expense of instruction in Slovak. Hungarian educators fear a move toward increasing the number of hours taught in Slovak in Hungarian-language schools, an obligation to teach an overly nationalist version of Slovak history, and a possible decrease in funding to minority education. The leadership of the Selye Janos University in Komarno (the country's only Hungarian-language institution of higher learning) is especially worried about the university's future, as many members of parliament opposed its establishment two years ago (Jan Mikolaj, the current Minister of Education, voted against it). Decreases in funding and politically-motivated decisions against the accreditation of its programs and degrees would seriously harm the university's prospects for survival.

17. (SBU) Ethnic Hungarians are also concerned about SNS control of

the Ministry of Construction and Regional Development. Some of the most underdeveloped areas of the country are those that are inhabited mainly by Hungarians, and Hungarian politicians fear that there will be no efforts to develop them. The ministry controls much of the funding that Slovakia receives from the European Union, and Hungarians predict an inequitable distribution of these and other resources, directed away from regions with large Hungarian populations. The mayors of cities and villages in such regions fear an ethnically-motivated decrease in monetary support for infrastructure and community and cultural projects. They predict that the grant proposals they submit to the government might be rejected not because of poor quality but rather because they would mainly benefit Hungarians.

18. (SBU) In a more abstract sense, Hungarians also worry about a general change in societal attitude and an increase in ethnic tensions. The inclusion of SNS in the ruling coalition seemingly validates extremist opinions and thus empowers and emboldens people and groups with nationalist agendas. They are disappointed that a sizeable number of Slovaks support Slota and SNS; they fear this is a sign that the Hungarian community is far from gaining full acceptance in the country. Although there is no reason to predict any sort of violent confrontation, it is probable that people who hold anti-Hungarian views will express them more freely and openly than before (Embassy contacts point out recent increases in anti-Hungarian graffiti and verbal exchanges at sporting events).

#### SMK PREPARES TO DEFEND HUNGARIAN INTERESTS

19. (SBU) SMK members expressed satisfaction with the party's election results, which they claim reflect that ethnic Slovaks also voted for it (although this is impossible to prove). Nonetheless, the party received around 40,000 less votes than it did in 2002. As a prominent researcher specializing in minority issues pointed out, these votes are always SMK's to lose, as Slovakia's Hungarians either vote for the party or stay home on election day. This suggests a level of dissatisfaction with the party's performance in the last government. Several embassy contacts suggested that they hope the loss of votes and the status as an opposition party will force SMK to rethink its programs and strategies and perhaps allow some new voices and ideas to shape its future. The president of an important Hungarian cultural organization told Embosffs that he expects more open and honest dialogue between the party, the government, and the people. SMK politicians argue that they will have very little room for action as an opposition party; instead, they will focus on monitoring the ruling coalition (especially in terms of possible measures and statements against minorities) and alert the international community if they feel something is amiss. They highlight the need to cooperate closely with SDKU and KDH to form a strong and united opposition. On the other hand, minority issues will dominate the SMK agenda to the detriment of the party, suggest some Embassy contacts. Over the past eight years, SMK successfully established itself as a party representing the interests of all of Slovakia as an actor in the national government.

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Now, however, SMK shows signs of reverting back to being an ethnic party with an almost exclusive focus on responding to anti-minority statements. It is up to party leader Bela Bugar to preserve a truly national, not regional or ethnic, focus for the SMK.

#### PERSPECTIVES FROM THE MEDIA

110. (SBU) As Slovakia's main Hungarian-language daily (circulation 24,482; readership around 120,000), Uj Szo has devoted a great deal of coverage to minority issues and to the SNS agenda. Slota's statements have been the subject of numerous front-page articles and editorials over the past few weeks. Predictably, Uj Szo's slant favors Hungarians and SMK; the daily has been quite critical of the new government in general and of Slota in particular. Uj Szo's tendency to dwell on any remark or action that could be construed as anti-Hungarian is occasionally a bit sensationalistic; it certainly contributes to the sense of worry in the Hungarian community.

#### GOVERNMENTS OF HUNGARY AND SLOVAKIA REACT

¶11. (SBU) The Hungarian government has paid close attention to Slovak politics in light of the composition of the new ruling coalition. Hungarian FM Kinga Góncz called for the Slovak government to distance itself from Škuta's anti-minority remarks and agenda during her July meeting with new Slovak FM Jan Kubiš. A diplomat at the Hungarian embassy in Bratislava explained that the Hungarian government feels some responsibility toward Slovakia's Hungarian community and thus will continue to speak out against negative statements and actions directed at them. Privately, Hungarian diplomats are worried and rather pessimistic but are unwilling to discuss the subject publicly for fear of misunderstanding and harm to bilateral relations. Hungarian diplomats note that it is an "immense gesture" on the part of the Hungarian government to emphasize good bilateral relations and to defend Slovakia in the international arena. Nonetheless, the Hungarian MFA is worried that PM Fico does not take their concerns seriously; he blithely dismissed a letter MFA Góncz wrote to the Slovak government in response to Škuta's recent anti-Hungarian comments. In MFA Góncz's opinion, PM Fico has not adequately distanced himself or his government from Škuta's positions.

¶12. (SBU) The Slovak MFA is also trying to ease interethnic tensions. Slovak FM Kubiš' decision to go to Budapest for his first official visit abroad sent a strong signal that the country values good relations with Hungary, even though his visit elicited criticism from some members of the Slovak government (and Slovak President Ivan Gašparovič). MFA officers said the GOS is trying to avoid escalating Slovak-Hungarian tensions by responding seriously to provocations, such as removing a recent video clip that circulated on the Internet and depicted Slovak youths burning a Hungarian flag. It is also avoiding overreacting to rival Hungarian provocations, such as the throwing of paint on the Slovak Embassy in Budapest. The MFA notes the GOS is attempting to control the nationalist elements within the ruling coalition; indeed, Škuta has not made as many anti-minority remarks as he probably has had the opportunity to do. PM Fico made a point of attending the recent Hungarian National Day reception. Embassy contacts in the Hungarian community said they support and appreciate such efforts but add that they would like to see PM Fico condemn nationalism in general and Škuta in particular much more strongly in the future.

#### COMMENT

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¶13. (SBU) COMMENT: Slovakia's ethnic Hungarian community is decidedly pessimistic about the new government and the extent of SNS influence within it. Although some of them compare the new government to the one that was in power under Mečiar's leadership, it is highly unlikely that the next four years will bear much resemblance to the 1990s. Slovakia is now a member of NATO, the OSCE, and the European Union; these institutions constrain possible actions against minorities. There are also a number of new legal frameworks in domestic legislation to protect minority rights. Nonetheless, ethnic Hungarians worry that the government will find ways to curtail minority life through more clandestine measures, such as decreases in funding for education, cultural activities, and municipalities with Hungarian populations. It is difficult to predict what constitutes the breaking point for Slovakia's Hungarian community, but above all Hungarians value their ability to use the Hungarian language in education, government offices, and public life. They will protest when this is threatened either through measures aimed at limiting Hungarian-language use or drastic decreases in monetary support for Hungarian-language institutions.

¶14. (SBU) In light of the current tensions, US Embassy Bratislava is using every opportunity available to promote the importance of tolerance, ethnic diversity, and respect for minority rights. The Ambassador has stressed these ideas in all his calls to new government officials and will continue to do so both in public and in private. We will publicly condemn hate speech and hate crimes while applauding efforts at minority integration. We recognize the concerns specific to the Hungarian community and will monitor the

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government's statements and actions, particularly in the areas of education, culture, and regional development. The ultimate goal is to ease tensions and promote understanding between all Slovak

citizens, including ethnic minorities.

VALLEE